



## *Making a Difference . . .*

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# Parental Engagement

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### *ISSUE IN BRIEF*

The relationships between youth and parents are central and sensitive elements in the successful development of adolescents. We recognize the importance of numerous adults in a young person's life and of the need to provide support and skills to these adults. Furthermore, we understand the importance of modeling positive adult behavior for youth and insist that parent involvement can produce positive outcomes. Regarding sexuality education and reproductive health services, HTN contends that effective youth development includes healthy sexual development. Early and frequent discussions about sexual health and maturity must occur between children and the important adults in their lives, as well as in school. Youth without supportive adult role models require special attention and services. Open discussion not only advances the dissemination of useful information to adolescents, it also increases the likelihood that teens will return to parents, teachers or guardians with any future questions, concerns or issues.

### *Putting Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to Work*

**You can use Healthy Teen Network's Advocacy Resource Guides to:**

1. Urge local and state policymakers to address issues that are important to the health and success of today's youth.
2. Educate school administrators or health care officials about unique issues facing adolescents.
3. Engage with the media (e.g., in a letter to the editor or an interview) using effective language to frame an issue facing youth.
4. Present to funders on why they should invest in your work with or on behalf of youth.
5. Connect to more information on youth issues and other organizations advocating for youth.

# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## The Concern

Parent-child communication could be one of the most effective tools to combat teen pregnancy and protect against STIs, HIV and AIDS. However, whether out of fear, embarrassment or denial, parents typically don't take advantage of this opportunity to connect and educate their children. This is unfortunate because studies have revealed that most adolescents are open to discussing sexuality, contraception and relationship issues with their parents. It is negative parental reaction and judgment that they are weary of. Adolescents who obtain their sex education solely from peers, the media or abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are severely disadvantaged and susceptible to inaccurate and/or misleading information.

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The children of actively involved parents—who consistently broach the subject of sex, HIV/AIDS, contraception, peer pressure, sexual identity, and body image—are more likely to delay sex, use protection and have fewer sexual partners than those whose parents either avoid the subjects all together or are overly strict about them. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004). By creating an environment where the mention of sex provokes discomfort and awkwardness, parents unknowingly perpetuate negative ideas about sexuality, i.e. that it is shameful and/or unnatural. Consequently, there is the very real danger of adolescents resisting parental involvement because they want to avoid disapproval and/or punishment.

Parent-child communication not only allows parents to impart necessary information about pregnancy and STI prevention to their children, it also permits them to formulate their overall attitude towards sexuality, sexual responsibility and healthy relationships. However, many parents balk at the sometimes intimidating task and their child's future decisions could be affected by their evasion or reluctance.

## Prevalence

Although a majority of teens—71% of girls and 69% of boys—report talking to their parents about sex, studies show that the design and content of these discussions differs greatly depending on the adolescents' gender. When speaking to teenage girls, parents cover birth control methods and how to refuse sex. Conversely, when speaking to teenage boys, parents generally limit their talk to condom use and STIs. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006) More than half of all teenage girls have talked to parents about saying no to sex (57%) and different methods of birth control (51%). These numbers when compared to teenage boys (45% and 33%, respectively) display significant statistical evidence of a gender based information gap. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006) Concerning influence, 45% of teens state that their parents have the most, while 48% of parents feel that peers hold the majority of influence over teens. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004) As such, parents hold more influence than they realize.

Age, race, and ethnicity also affect levels of parent-child communication. The younger a teen, the more likely they are to talk to their parents about sex. Seventy-five percent of younger teen girls (aged 15-17) and 71% of younger teen boys have talked to a parent about sex related issues, compared to 66% each of older teens. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006) Regarding race and ethnicity, non-white Hispanic teens are less likely than both non-Hispanic black and non-Hispanic white teens to report talking about sex with a parent.

## Impact on Behavior

Parental engagement doesn't limit itself to occasional discussions about sex, STIs and contraception; it requires parents to become active participants in their children's lives. Vigilant parents, who frequently express love and concern, increase the likelihood of raising teens who avoid risky behaviors such as early sex, pregnancy, school failure, and drug or alcohol abuse. (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004) This indicates that the key to possessing an effective and

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positive influence over teens is to foster a connection with them at a young age and continually develop it as they become adolescents.

Parent-child connectedness builds a foundation of trust and affinity with one's child that facilitates communication. If this emotional bond is nourished it can cultivate a closeness that impacts future teenage behavior and decisions. (Jones, Rachel K and Purcell, Alison, 2005) A nurtured relationship provides parents with the perfect opportunity to honestly convey personal beliefs and expectations; impart pregnancy and HIV/AIDS prevention facts; and shape the way their teen views sexuality and healthy relationships. Firm but non-judgmental parental engagement has been shown to deter risky teenage sexual and health behavior. Thus, parents should work toward overcoming personal fears and/or denial, initiate discussion and ultimately arm teens with knowledge and support.

## ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Healthy Teen Network makes the following recommendations regarding the advocacy of parental engagement in adolescent sexual and reproductive health. We strongly urge the creation of comprehensive support services and funding for programs that advance dialogue between parent and child.

### Awareness

- ✓ HTN recommends that comprehensive sexuality education and services are an integral part of the health and education systems, since sexuality is a normal healthy part of life.

### Education

- ✓ HTN supports the development and expansion of programs that provide skills and resources to adults that enable them to provide comprehensive sexuality education and services to adolescents in the home, school, and community.
- ✓ HTN recommends that efforts designed to involve parents and families build on cultural strengths; cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences must be addressed when designing effective comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health service interventions.
- ✓ HTN reaffirms that youth are entitled to medically accurate, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based reproductive health information in a safe and confidential environment. HTN supports comprehensive sexuality education that is free of fear- and shame-based strategies.

### Support Systems

- ✓ HTN reaffirms the essential support and engagement of parents in all aspects of comprehensive sexuality education.
- ✓ HTN recommends and encourages support systems for adolescents and parents who wish to begin an open dialogue about sexual development, contraception, abstinence, and healthy dating relationships.

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### Behaviors

- ✓ HTN supports the right to confidential reproductive health services (particularly for HIV/AIDS, STIs and pregnancy prevention) in the interest of promoting the health and well being of youth, as well as the broader public health.
- ✓ HTN supports and encourages parental communication and engagement but opposes legal mandates for parental notification or consent that restrict access to or deter youth from seeking critically important reproductive health services and information.
- ✓ HTN affirms the need to engage young people in discussions and decision making about issues that impact their lives.

### Funding

- ✓ HTN recommends increased funding for:
  - Programs that promote and facilitate teen and parental engagement with joint activities, workshops, meetings and/or social events.
  - Programs that advise parents on how and when to talk to their children about sex and reproductive health.
  - Resources that can be used by parents and teens that open up and mediate discussion.
  - Advertising campaigns that support teen-parent communication and forewarn the consequences of parental indifference or timidity.

## DEFINITIONS

**Parents:** Adults who provides youth basic needs such as food, water and shelter; as well as adults who offer youth love, care, and emotional support. This role can be filled by parents, guardians, caregivers, and other actively involved adults.

## ABOUT HEALTHY TEEN NETWORK

Healthy Teen Network (HTN) is a national membership organization that provides resources and services to professionals working in the field of adolescent reproductive health—specifically teen pregnancy prevention, teen pregnancy, and teen parenting. Healthy Teen Network believes youth can make responsible decisions about sexuality, pregnancy and parenting when they have complete and accurate information, resources, and support that are culturally relevant and appropriate to their age, gender, and developmental stage.

## RESOURCES

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/educational-resources/for-parents.htm>

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

<http://www.siecus.org/pubs/biblio/bibs0011.html>

4 parents

[www.4parents.gov](http://www.4parents.gov)

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